SHORTY'S CELEBRATION

By Frederick White

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Shorty McGovern was what is known in certain circles as "a second story man." His friends respected him for his undeniable ability for getting and, what was really quite as important, for getting away.

The police respected him, but principally for the latter gift.

Shorty respected himself sometimes, but not often. After a particularly good piece of work, when his finances would permit, Shorty gave himself up to a period of dull respectability, a proceeding rather foreign to the disposition of a "second story man." For days he would keep to his room, reading voraciously every book upon which he could lay his hands. Dickens was his favorite author, and he loved stories of children.

Shorty was fond of children and never disturbed them more than was necessary when engaged in his business.

It was when his finances thus permitted him to rest and dip into literature that Shorty came nearest to respecting himself, but unfortunately there always came a day when he was forced to sally forth and again become the hunter and the hunted, usually the central figure, though unknown, in items of various length in the newspapers.

The residence section of the city was invariably the field of his efforts. A day's stroll would disclose the opportunity, and then night and a few necessary implements of trade enabled him to do the rest.

As he walked briskly up the avenue this winter afternoon nothing in Shorty's appearance would attract particular attention. Plenty of young men were doing the same thing. However, a discerning eye might have noted that when he passed a policeman Shorty seemed suddenly afflicted with a severe cold in his head, which necessitated the use of a large handkerchief. Between policemen Shorty's head seemed to be in a perfectly normal condition.

Turning up a side street, he slackened his pace somewhat, and his trained eye searched every detail of the houses on either side of the way. Ordinary people might have thought them painfully alike, but Shorty knew otherwise. Here was a basement window unguarded by the usual iron frame; there a balcony gave promise of shelter from passing eyes while the window was being forced.

At the corner Shorty passed a church. He had no designs on the church, but the swell of the organ and the sound of children's voices came to him through a half open window. They were devoting all their energies to the last verse of the carol:

Ring the joy bells over all the earth,
Stealing, pealing, let them tell his birth.
Angel music, let it sweetly fall,
Singing, bringing peace and joy to all.

The extra power thrown into the words "joy to all" recalled to Shorty the fact that Sunday schools frequently gave celebrations for their faithful scholars. Exactly! These children were having a Christmas tree at the church after exhausting the holiday season at home.

Suddenly he had a desire to see the real thing if they would let him in. The main door opened around the avenue, but the vestry door was at his hand. He'd take a look at it anyway. Shorty started forward, then stopped. Through a swinging baize door came the murmur of voices, then a strange crackling sound and the cry "Fire!"

Shorty was trained to act quickly whatever the emergency. On the corner was a red firebox, and it was the work of only a second to smash the glass and turn in the alarm.

As he ran from the box the children, pale faced and frightened, were pouring through the doors, and above their heads far back in the church he could see the gayly decorated tree blazing in a cloud of smoke. He saw that the youngsters were being well handled by two young men who stood on either side of the doorway. Then his other nature asserted itself.

To Shorty and his ilk a fire always means loot. The habit of years was strong upon him. Back to the vestry he ran and crept through the narrow corridor and the baize door. Through an archway he looked into the smoke filled church. There was no one in sight. The burning tree and the smoke screened him from view. He glanced about hastily, and his eye rested on the alms basin, piled high with the children's annual offering. It stood on a table near the reading desk, and sparks from the burning tree were falling upon it.

He rushed forward, snatched it and began to cram the envelopes containing the money into his overcoat pockets. He must get away before the firemen arrived on the scene. The silver plate he would button under his overcoat.

He worked feverishly, for already the choir stalls were smoldering. He had the money at last and, ripping open the coat, was about to conceal the plate when a voice rang through the smoke laden air:

"The children's money! Can no one save it?"

Shorty crouched low and began to work his way to the baize door. The smoke was stifling. His head throbbed, and he found himself repeating mechanically: "The children's money! The children's money!"

His ears rang with the music of an organ and childish voices.

He wondered if he was going to die, choked by smoke, with the children's money in his pockets.

Angel music, let it sweetly fall,
Singing, bringing peace and joy to all.

He reached the vestry room. The air was better. He could breathe more freely. A few steps more and he would be safe—safe with the children's money.

Again came the cry from behind the curtain of flames, "Save the children's offering!"

A struggle was going on in the soul of Shorty. Something, he knew not what, surged in his breast.

The aged rector stood in the aisle as near the burning tree as the heat would permit. The last of the children had been led safely through the arched doorway. The rattle of engines sounded far down the street and the clang of the fire gongs.

Would they be in time to save the offering that had meant so much personal sacrifice for the children? Then suddenly something black crashed through the lower branches of the tree and fell over the rail into the aisle. It was a man.

The rector sprang forward and dragged him away from the shower of sparks which followed his fall. It was the disreputable Shorty who looked up into the rector's face.

"Unbutton me coat!" he gasped.

The rector obeyed and with an exclamation of surprise caught the silver plate. He lifted it wonderingly, and Shorty struggled to his feet.

"Feel in me pockets. Me hands is burnt." The rector hurriedly pulled forth the envelopes and started to speak.

"Quick!" ordered Shorty. There was a rush of feet, and half a dozen firemen dashed in bearing a hose. Where there were firemen there would also be police.

"Got it all?" he yelled at the wondering rector. The latter nodded.

"You must come with me. I'm afraid you are badly burned," he murmured confusedly.

Shorty shook his head and started for the door.

"It's nothin'," he said. "I did it fer the kids, so's their Christmas wouldn't be spoiled. S'long." And he pushed his way through the crowd and vanished.

Some hours later the pain of his burns drove him to the dispensary, where he told a plausible tale of an overturned lamp and was promptly and properly bandaged. Walking down street, he met a friend in the same line of business as himself. The obvious impossibility of doing any remunerative work with hands like boxing gloves appealed to the friend and secured Shorty a loan of $10. Then he went to bed.

The next morning Shorty read an account of the fire and also a public acknowledgment by the rector of the bravery of an unknown man who at risk of his own life had saved the children's offering, amounting to nearly $300. The rector expressed his desire to meet personally the brave fellow if the latter would communicate, etc. Shorty began to feel proud of himself. This was genuine respectability.

For one gladsome week he gave himself over to reading and respectability, but he did not communicate his address. Then the week and the $10 came to an end simultaneously, and Shorty was forced to take another walk up town with a view to studying balconies and unbarred windows.

Ruskin's Toys.

The home rule of Ruskin's mother was well nigh Puritanic in severity. His toys were few and his source of amusement limited. He says:

For toys I had a bunch of keys to play with so long as I was capable of pleasure in what glittered and jingled, as I grew older I had a cart and a ball and when I was six years old two boxes of well cut wooden bricks.

With these modest but I still think entirely sufficient possessions, and being always summarily whipped if I cried, did not do as I was bid or tumbled on the stairs, I soon attained serene and secure methods of life and motion and could pass my days contentedly in tracing the squares and comparing the colors of my carpet, examining the knots in the wood of the floor or counting the bricks in the opposite houses.

There were also intervals of rapturous excitement during the filling of the water cart through its leathern pipe from the dripping iron post at the pavement edge or the still more admirable proceedings of the turncock when he turned and turned until a fountain sprang up in the middle of the street.

But the carpet and what patterns I could find in bed covers, dresses or wall papers to be examined were my chief resources.

How a Dog Told of His Needs.

Ben was our faithful, jolly old bull terrier. For ten years he was a member of the family. Perhaps Ben had one bad trait; he would "fight at the drop of the hat." This necessitated keeping him on a chain most of the time, although I confess deep admiration for his ability as a scrapper. I love a fighter that fights fair, and Ben was that kind. I never saw him tackle a dog smaller than himself, but have seen him whip canines apparently large enough to eat him. When on the chain, Ben had ways of his own of notifying us of his wants. A steady succession of low barks, with a short interval between each bark, indicated that it was his mealtime. A quick, sharp bark, with long intervals between each bark, accompanied with low whining, indicated thirst. Loud, steady barking informed us that some one was coming, and spasmodic, choking barking was his way of letting us know a dog was near and that he was anxious to mix with him. At home we are all of the opinion that if the human members of the family can reason, then so could Ben.—Forest and Stream.

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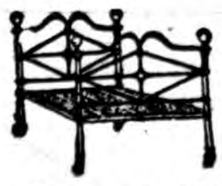
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